THE LAST LEAF

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

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He had a rosier hue
And her cheek was like
A rose
In the snow —

THE LAST LEAF

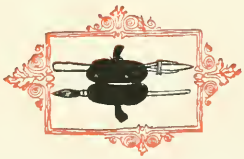
A POEM

BY

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

ILLUSTRATED BY

GEORGE WHARTON EDWARDS & F. HOPKINSON SMITH



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Beverly Farms, Mass.
July 12th 1894

My dear Publishers and Friend.

I have read the proof you sent me and find nothing in it which I feel called upon to alter or explain.

I have lasted long enough to serve as an illustration of my own poem. I am one of the very last of the leaves which still cling to the bough of life that budded in the Spring of the nineteenth century. The days of my years are three score and twenty, and I am almost halfway up the steep incline which leads me toward the base of the new century so near to which I have already climbed.

I am pleased to find that this poem carrying with it the marks of having been written in the joyful morning of life is still read and cared for. It will with a smile on my lips that I wrote it; I cannot read it without a sigh of tender remembrance

I hope it will not sadden my older readers, while it may amuse some of the younger ones to whom its experiences are as yet only fleeting fancies.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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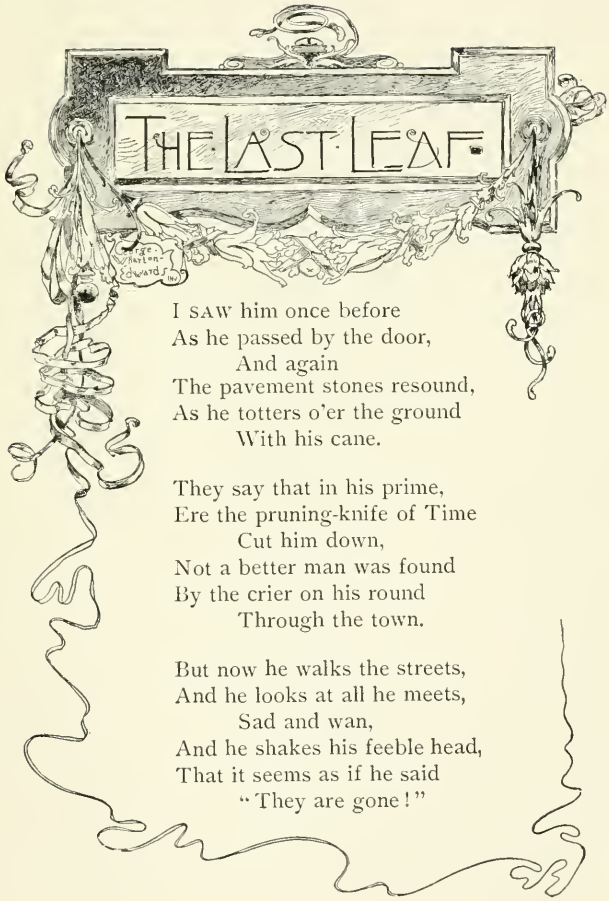
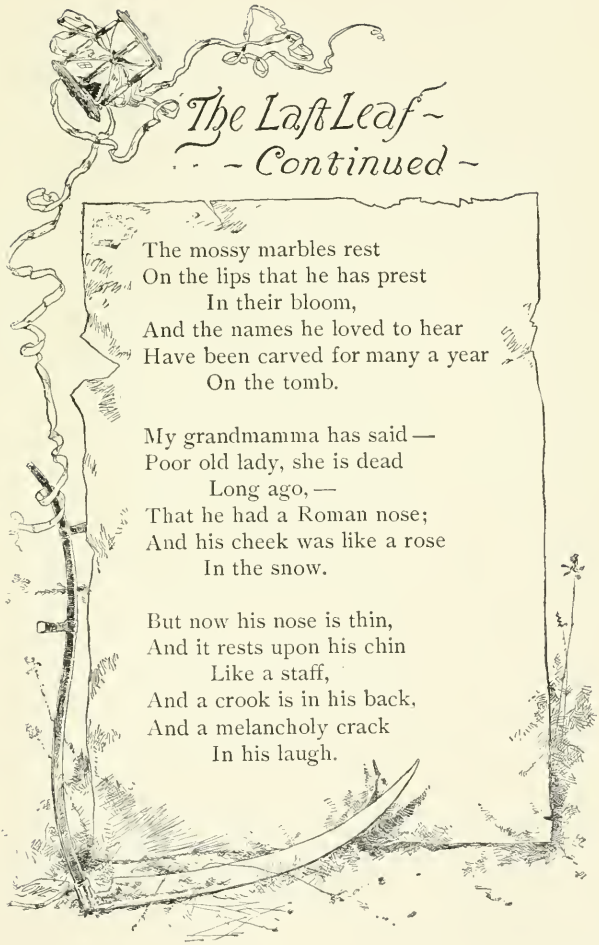


I saw him once before
As he passed by the door,
And again
The pavement stones resound,
As he totters o'er the ground
With his cane.

They say that in his prime,
Ere the pruning-knife of Time
Cut him down,
Not a better man was found
By the crier on his round
Through the town.

But now he walks the streets,
And he looks at all he meets,
Sad and wan,
And he shakes his feeble head,
That it seems as if he said
"They are gone!"



The Last Leaf
— Continued —

The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
In their bloom,
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year
On the tomb.

My grandmamma has said —
Poor old lady, she is dead
Long ago, —
That he had a Roman nose;
And his cheek was like a rose
In the snow.

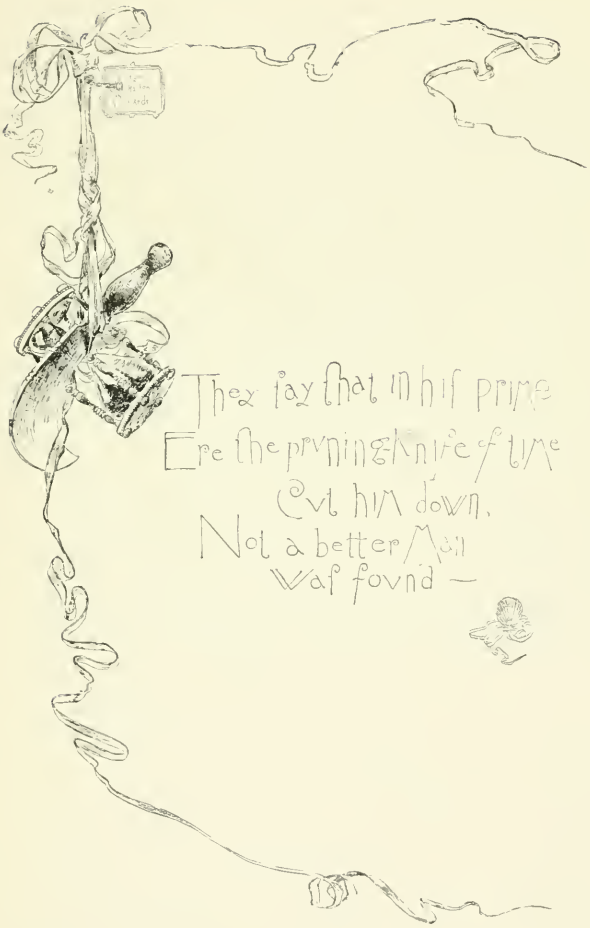
But now his nose is thin,
And it rests upon his chin
Like a staff,
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.

The LAST LEAF (Concluded)

I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here.
But the old three-cornered hat
And the breeches, and all that
Are so queer!

And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the Spring,
Let them smile as I do now
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling.

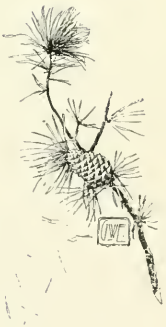
"I saw him once before
As he passed by the door"

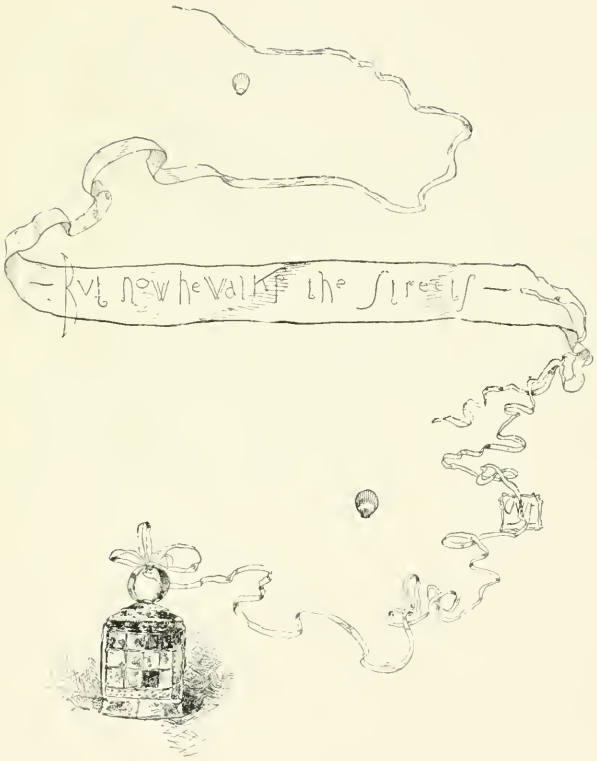


They say that in his prime
Ere the pruning-knife of time
Cut him down,
Not a better Man
Was found —

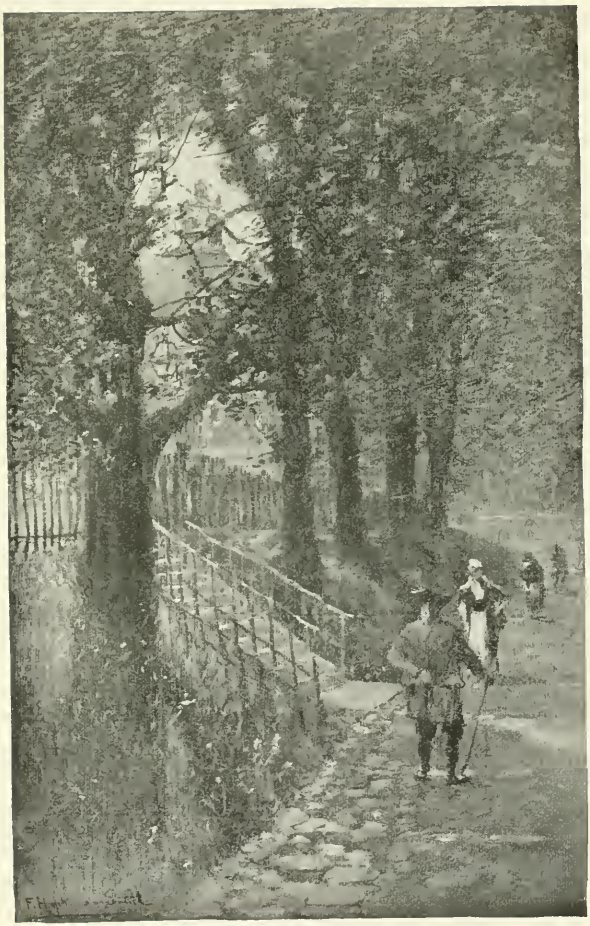
~By the crier on his round through the town~

Through the town —

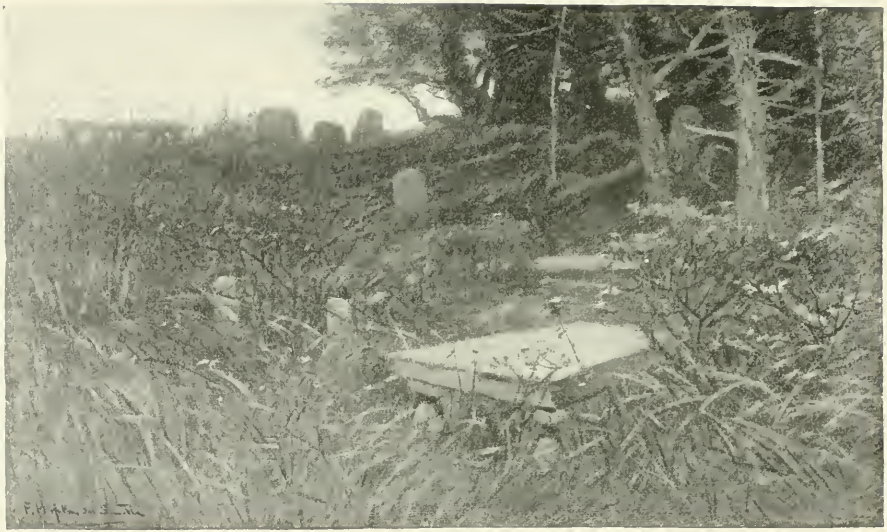


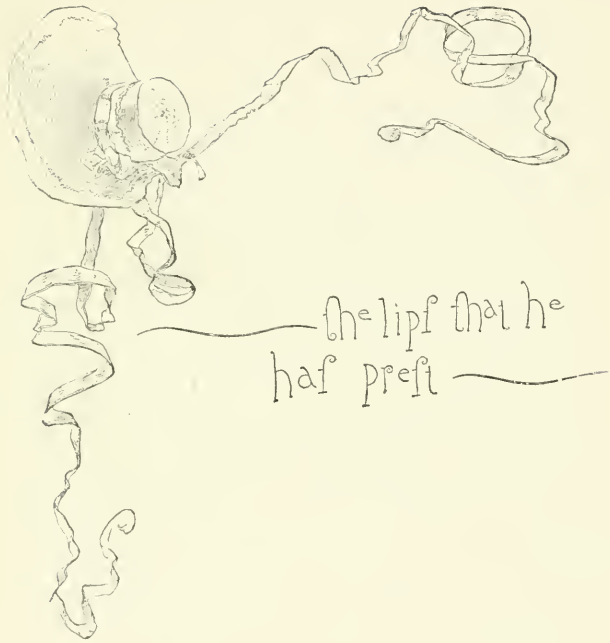

But now he walks the streets

The Spectr



The mossy Marbles rest —

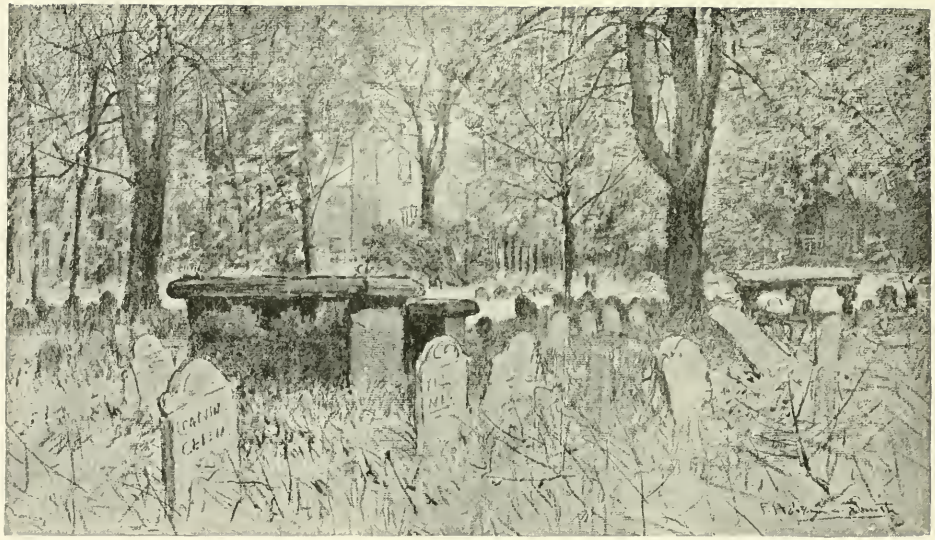


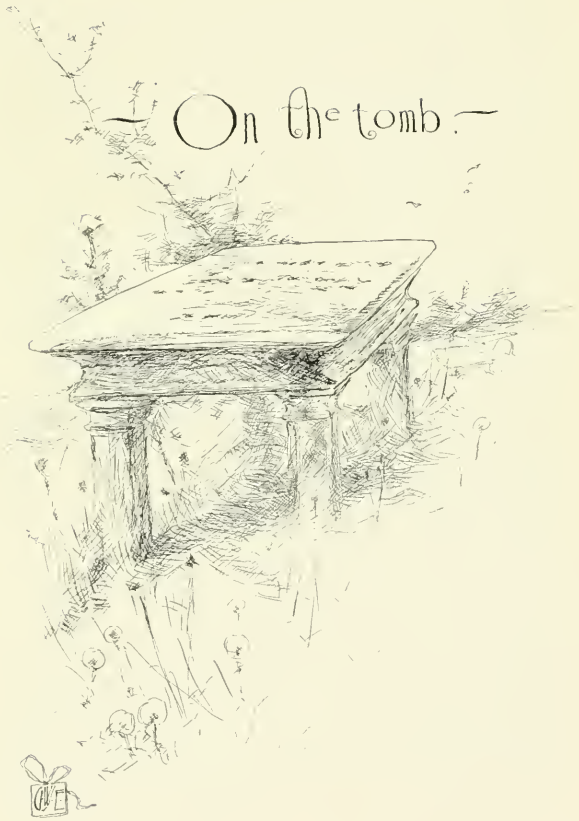

the lipf that he
haf preft

In their bloom

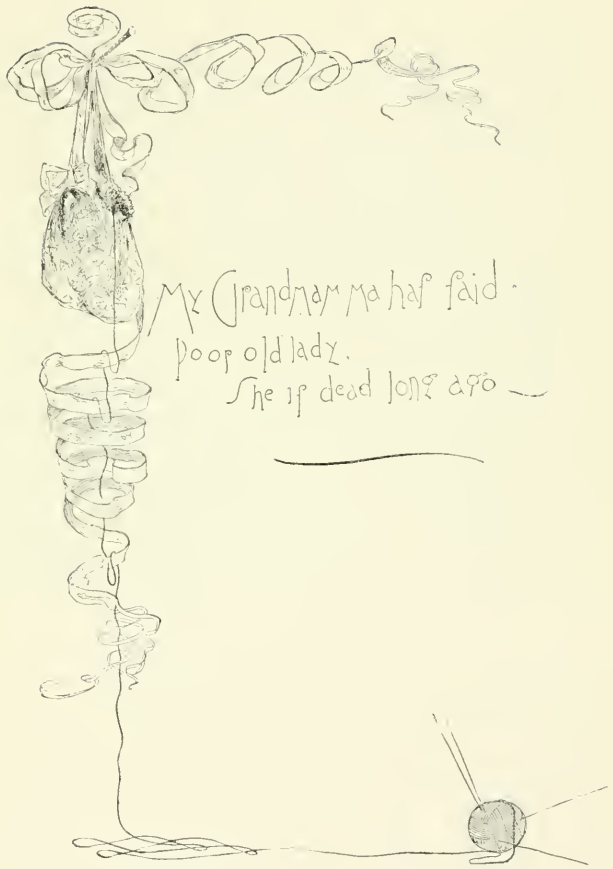
George Sharpe Edwards

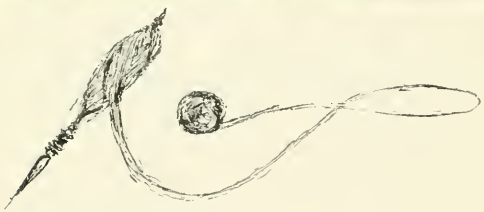
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year.
On the tomb.



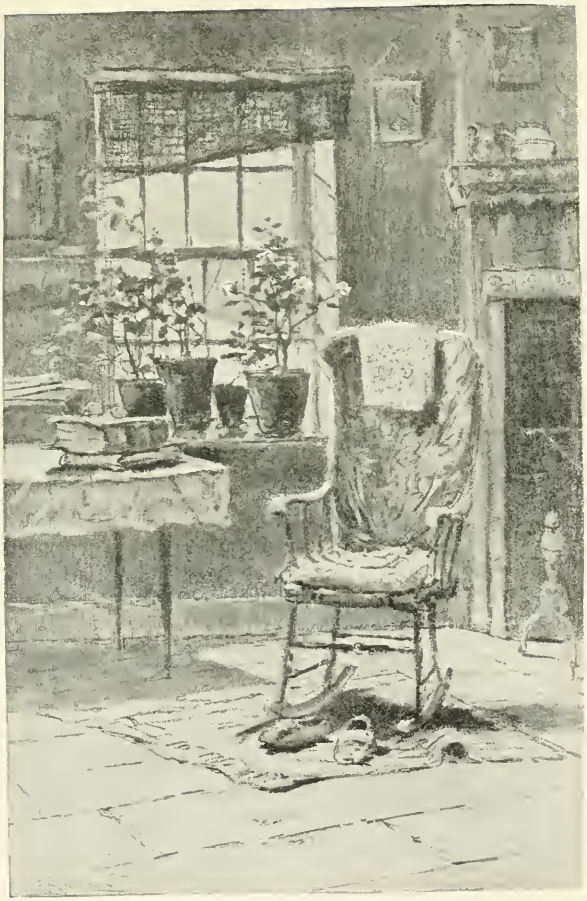

On the tomb

Jane Wharton Edwards.


My Grandmamma has said.
poor old lady.
She is dead long ago —

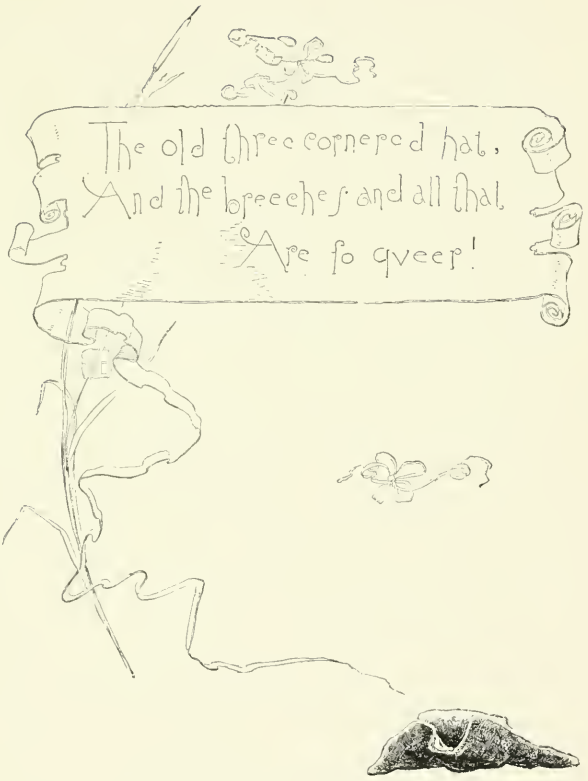


like a rose in the snow



"In the Snow"

But now his nose is thin
And it rests upon his chin
Like a staff


The old three cornered hat,
And the breeches and all that,
Are so queer!

George Wharton Edwards

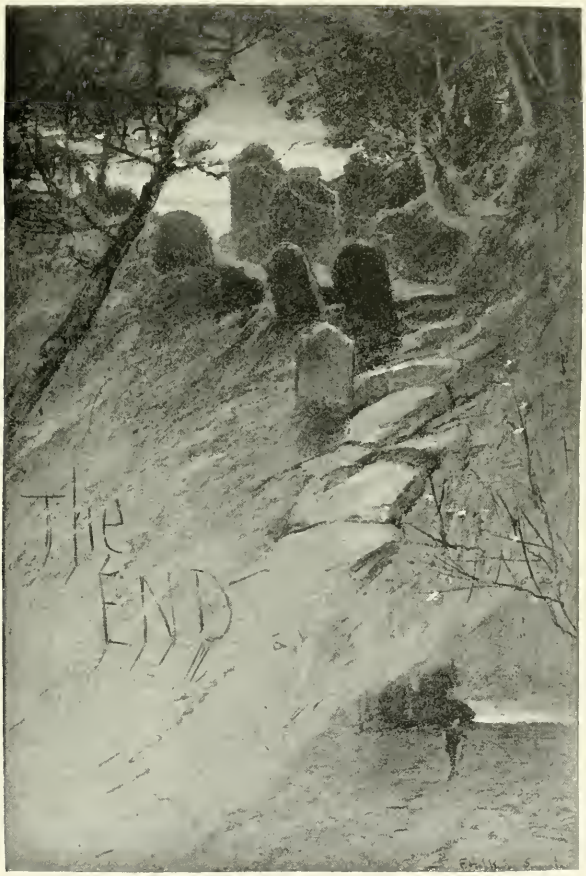
– If I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
In the Spring. —

The last leaf upon the tree—

— In the Spring.

The old forsaken
Bough

THE
END


THE END

THE HISTORY OF THIS POEM.

My publishers tell me that it would add to the interest of the Poem if I would mention any circumstances connected with its composition, publication, and reception. This request must be the excuse of my communicativeness. Just when it was written I cannot exactly say, nor in what paper or periodical it was first published. It must have been written before April, 1833; probably in 1831 or 1832. It was republished in the first edition of my poems, in the year 1836.

The Poem was suggested by the sight of a figure well known to Bostonians of the years just mentioned, that of Major Thomas Melville, "the last of the cocked hats," as he was sometimes called. The Major had been a personable young man, very evidently, and retained evidence of it in

"The monumental pomp of age,"—

which had something imposing and something odd about it for youthful eyes like mine. He was often pointed at as one of the "Indians" of the famous "Boston Tea-Party" of 1774. His aspect among the crowds of a later generation reminded me of a withered leaf which has held to its stem through the storms of autumn and winter, and finds itself still clinging to its bough while the new growths of spring are bursting their buds and spreading their foliage all around it. I make this explanation for the benefit of those who have been puzzled by the lines

The last leaf upon the tree
In the Spring.

The way in which it came to be written in a somewhat singular measure was this. I had become a little known as a versifier, and I thought that one or

two other young writers were following my efforts with imitations, not meant as parodies and hardly to be considered improvements on their models. I determined to write in a measure which would at once betray any copyist. So far as it was suggested by any previous poem, the echo must have come from Campbell's "Battle of the Baltic," with its short terminal lines, such as the last of these two,

By thy wild and stormy steep,
Elsinore.

But I do not remember any poem in the same measure, except such as have been written since its publication.

The Poem as first written had one of those false rhymes which produce a shudder in all educated persons, even in the Poems of Keats and others who ought to have known better than to admit them. The guilty verse ran thus: —

But now he walks the streets
And he looks at all he meets
So forlorn,
And he shakes his feeble head
That it seems as if he said
"They are gone!"

A little more experience, to say nothing of the sneer of an American critic in an English periodical, showed me that this would never do. Here was what is called a "cockney rhyme," — one in which the sound of the letter *r* is neglected, — maltreated as the letter *h* is insulted by the average Briton by leaving it out everywhere except where it should be silent. Such an ill-mated pair as "forlorn" and "gone" could not possibly pass current in good rhyming society. But what to do about it was the question. I *must* keep

"They are gone!"

and I could not think of any rhyme which I could

work in satisfactorily. In this perplexity my friend, Mrs. Folsom, wife of that excellent scholar, Mr. Charles Folsom, then and for a long time the unsparing and infallible corrector of the press at Cambridge, suggested the line

"Sad and wan,"

which I thankfully adopted and have always retained.

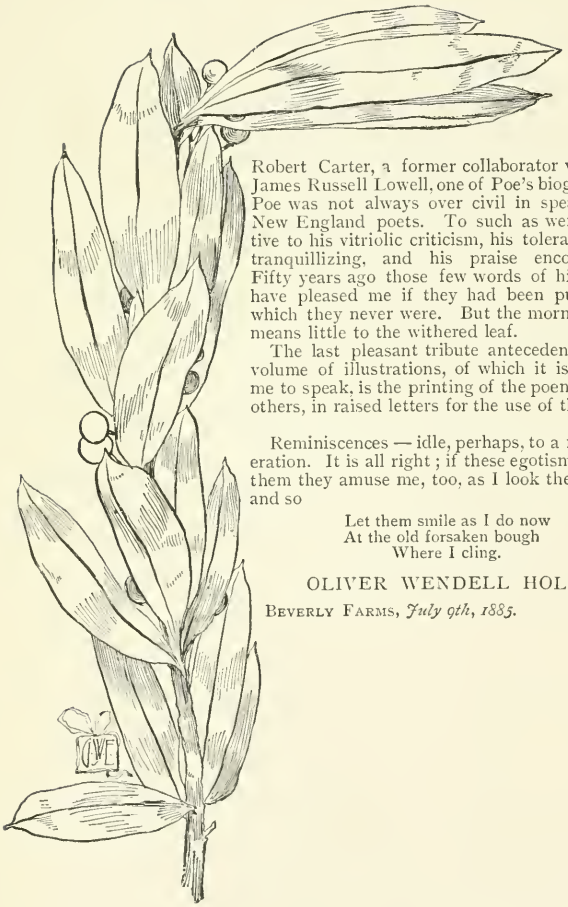
The Poem has been occasionally imitated, often reprinted, and not rarely spoken well of. I hope I shall be forgiven for mentioning three tributes which have been especially noteworthy in my own remembrance.

Good Abraham Lincoln had a great liking for it, and repeated it from memory to Governor Andrew, as the Governor himself told me.

I have a copy of it made by the hand of Edgar Allan Poe, with an introductory remark which I will quote in connection with the one which precedes it.

"If we regard at the same time accuracy, rhythm, melody, and invention, or novel combination of metre, I should have no hesitation in saying that a young and true poetess of Kentucky, Mrs. Amelia Welby, has done more in the way of really good verse than any individual among us. I shall be pardoned, nevertheless, for quoting and commenting upon an excellently well conceived and well managed specimen of versification, which will aid in developing some of the propositions already expressed. It is the 'Last Leaf' of Oliver W. Holmes."

Then follows the whole poem carefully copied in the well-known delicate hand of the famous poet and critic. The roll of manuscript nearly five feet long closes with this poem, so that the promised comment is missing. The manuscript was given me by the late Mr.



Robert Carter, a former collaborator with Mr. James Russell Lowell, one of Poe's biographers. Poe was not always over civil in speaking of New England poets. To such as were sensitive to his vitriolic criticism, his toleration was tranquillizing, and his praise encouraging. Fifty years ago those few words of his would have pleased me if they had been published, which they never were. But the morning dew means little to the withered leaf.

The last pleasant tribute antecedent to this volume of illustrations, of which it is not for me to speak, is the printing of the poem, among others, in raised letters for the use of the blind.

Reminiscences — idle, perhaps, to a new generation. It is all right; if these egotisms amuse them they amuse me, too, as I look them over; and so

Let them smile as I do now
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

Beverly Farms, *July 9th, 1885.*

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Holmes, Oliver Wendell
The last leaf

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